



Corzine: Seniors will suffer under Bush Medicare changes

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By TOM HESTER JR.
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The Bush administration's new Medicare plan will make it complicated and expensive for New Jersey senior citizens to obtain prescription drugs, U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine, D-N.J., said yesterday.

Corzine said the new rules will disrupt prescription drug benefits for the 190,000 New Jersey senior citizens enrolled in the state's prescription drug program, called Pharmaceutical Assistance to the Aged and Disabled, or PAAD, and the 140,000 senior citizens enrolled in the state's Medicaid program.

"This is just flat out wrong," Corzine said.

The state's PAAD program is generally viewed as generous.

Under the Bush administration program, states won't be able to enroll low-income Medicare beneficiaries in specific prescription drug programs when the new program takes effect in 2006.

The administration contends allowing states to do so would violate "beneficiaries' freedom of choice and undermine competition among insurers," said Leslie Norwalk, a deputy administrator with the federal Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services.

But Corzine and Fred Jacobs, state health commissioner, yesterday said the rules mean the state could no longer negotiate on behalf of senior citizens for prescription drug coverage, as it does now. Instead, senior citizens will have to file multiple applications and shop for such coverage themselves.

"It is completely insensitive to the population we have," Corzine said.

Corzine, who is seeking the Democratic Party nomination for governor, and U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg wrote a letter to President Bush asking him to revise the rules. They also plan to introduce legislation to revise them, though they'll likely need Republican help since Republicans control Congress.

"We'll work very hard to get bipartisan support on this," Corzine said.

Acting Gov. Richard J. Codey has teamed with Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell to oppose the new rules. Corzine said the new rules could force the state to spend an additional \$92 million in administrative and other costs.

Meanwhile, U.S. Rep. Frank Pallone, D-Long Branch, who wants to replace Corzine in the Senate, toured the Children's Specialized Hospital Outpatient Center in Hamilton yesterday to decry Bush's overall proposed cuts in Medicaid funding.

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